Metropolitan Housing and Communities Center

Brief No. 1, March 2008

Three-City Study of Moving to Opportunity

Girls in the 'Hood: The Importance of Feeling Safe

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Girls growing up in high poverty face specific risks because of their gender—harassment, domestic violence, and the risk of sexual assault.

> Foul. Just like in any other projects. . . . They'll call them Bs [bitches], hos, tramps, sluts, stuff like that. They don't care. They don't have no respect for females at all. They beat up females over here and all that, throw them out of windows. Oh, my God. These projects is crazy. They throw their girlfriends out of windows and everything else, pull out guns on them and stuff. They don't really too much care for females over here.
>
> *—Tonya,[1] a girl growing up in public housing in Los Angeles, describing how men treat women and girls in her neighborhood.*

Adolescents growing up in neighborhoods marked by concentrated poverty are at risk for a range of problems, including poor physical and mental health, risky sexual behavior, and delinquency. And, as Tonya's description of life in her neighborhood indicates, girls growing up in high poverty face specific risks because of their gender: demoralizing effects of omnipresent and constant harassment, pervasive domestic violence, and high risk of sexual assault. These girls also experience pressure to become sexually active at increasingly younger ages, with early sexual initiation bringing its own hazards: pregnancy, the risk of sexually transmitted disease, and dropping out of school to care for children. All these hazards have serious long-term implications for the prospects of low-income adolescent girls.

The federal government's Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing Demonstration (MTO) was a unique effort to try to improve the life chances of very poor families with children by helping them leave the disadvantaged environments that contribute to these kinds of poor outcomes (see text box on page 7). Moving to a better neighborhood might benefit adolescents in several ways by providing better monitoring of behavior to reduce the threat of violent crime and disorder; offering stronger institutional resources for youth, notably high-quality schools, youth programs, and health services; providing access to more positive peer groups; and promoting changes in parents' well-being and behavior because of increased opportunities and social pressures.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) launched MTO in 1994 in five cities: Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. MTO targeted families living in some of the nation's poorest, highest-crime communities—distressed public housing—and used housing subsidies to offer them a chance to move to lower-poverty neighborhoods. The hope was that moving would provide these families with access to communities that offered better schools, city services—police, parks, libraries, sanitation—and economic opportunities. Participation in MTO was voluntary. Those who volunteered were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups: a control group (families retained their public housing unit and received no new assistance); a

Section 8 comparison group (families received the standard counseling and voucher subsidy for use in the private market); or an experimental group, which received a voucher usable only in a low-poverty neighborhood (less than 10 percent poor as of the 1990 Census).

Follow-up research on the MTO families was conducted in 2002, about five years after they moved (Orr et al. 2003). Surprisingly, adolescent girls seemed to have benefited in important ways from moving to better neighborhoods, while boys seemed to have not benefited at all. These findings have been very controversial, with much research and policy attention focused on why boys seem to have fared so badly. Focusing solely on the disappointing results for boys, however, discounts the importance of the positive effects for girls. Clearly, MTO successfully improved the overall well-being of girls who moved to low-poverty neighborhoods; exploring the factors that led to these unexpectedly positive outcomes can tell researchers a great deal about the importance of good neighborhood environments for adolescents.

The mostly qualitative Three-City Study of MTO (see text box on page 7), a large-scale, mixed-method study, was designed to examine key puzzles like the gender differences in outcomes for adolescents that emerged from the interim survey. The study combined qualitative interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, and analysis of census and administrative data. It was conducted in three of the five MTO sites: Boston, Los Angeles, and New York. The interviews and ethnographic fieldwork took place in 2004 and 2005, about 6 to 10 years after families' initial placement through the MTO program.[2]

In this brief, we use data from the Three-City Study to explore the puzzle of the gender differences in outcomes for MTO adolescents. According to our findings, the dramatic difference in neighborhood organization and safety is driving the positive effects for girls. In particular, girls seem to be benefiting from a reduction in "the female fear"—the fear of sexual victimization, verbal and physical harassment, and sexual exploitation (Gordon and Riger 1989). When social control mechanisms fail, as is the case in distressed public housing communities like those where the MTO families lived, all residents must cope with violence and disorder. But the physical and social threats that adolescent girls confront are very different from those facing boys. Girls in all types of communities experience at least some verbal and physical harassment, but in the socially isolated world of distressed public housing, the pressures for sexual activity are much greater, the threats more blatant, and the risk of rape and assault very real (Popkin et al. 2000). To avoid these threats, parents often monitor their daughters closely, making them spend much of their time indoors. The findings from this study suggest that the reduction of these gender-specific threats has benefited MTO girls who moved to lower-poverty neighborhoods.

Girls Benefit from MTO Moves, but Boys Do Not

MTO families moved to neighborhoods that were dramatically safer than the distressed public housing developments they lived in when they volunteered for the demonstration. When researchers followed up in 2002, experimental-group movers reported feeling safer overall and that their new communities had few problems with drug trafficking and crime (Orr et al. 2003). Our analysis of census tract–level crime data from Boston, Los Angeles, and Chicago shows that these perceptions reflect real differences in rates of violent crime (Kingsley and Pettit 2008). But, as discussed above, these changes in neighborhood conditions seem to have benefited only adolescent girls. Specifically, girls in the experimental group reported less psychological distress, anxiety, and substance use, and they were less likely to be arrested (especially for violent and property crimes) than girls in the control group. In contrast, adolescent boys in the experimental group reported more behavior problems and substance use, and they were more likely to be arrested for property crimes than boys in the control group.

How Girls Benefit from Safer Neighborhoods

When participants volunteered for MTO, the most common reason they cited was to get their families away from drugs and gangs. And, according to the follow-up survey, the majority of those in the experimental group believed they attained their goal. But women and girls gained even more than a general sense of safety; our analysis of data from the Three-City Study suggests that they achieved a dramatic reduction in the "female fear." Compared with their counterparts still living in high-poverty neighborhoods, female experimental-group participants reported less harassment from men and boys, less pressure to engage in sexual behavior, and, as a result, said they were less fearful. These girls—and their mothers—often spoke about what had happened to their friends who still lived in public housing and how they felt they had avoided that fate. The difference in pressure to engage in sex was especially significant for very young girls, who in high-poverty neighborhoods begin experiencing harassment and pressure during early adolescence.

Overall, there are clear differences between experimental-group movers' concerns and those of families still in high-poverty neighborhoods about harassment and pressure on adolescents—especially girls—to become sexually active. Generally, nearly all the girls in the experimental group and their mothers described feeling confident that they were safe from those types of risks in their new neighborhoods, while nearly the same proportion in high poverty described living with harassment.[3]

For example, Cassandra is a 15-year-old girl who has lived in low-poverty suburban neighborhoods outside Boston since 1994. She felt that she was safe from harassment in her neighborhood because it was simply unacceptable:

> Q: And how about the guys, how do the guys treat women around here?
> A: They know not to touch them.

And Terri, a young girl in the experimental group living in Los Angeles, could not even imagine that men in her low-poverty community might treat women badly:

> I don't really know because like everybody that I know they have husbands and stuff. Their moms and dads are together, so I don't know.

In addition to simply feeling safe, experimental-group movers' comments often reflected a sense of having escaped the risks of their original public housing communities. Some told of friends they left behind who already had children. Antoinette is a young woman in her early 20s whose family initially moved to a low-poverty neighborhood in the Bronx. She described what she thought would have happened to her if she had stayed in the projects:

> Because a lot of kids in my [old] neighborhood, like the girls, wound up not finishing junior high or just starting high school like one of my best friends. I mean, we were in every single class since we started school together. We even went to the same high school. And then like 9th grade she had a kid and that was it.

Pressure for Early Sexual Activity

An issue of particular concern for many mothers and girls was the pressure for early sexual initiation—especially what they viewed as older men and boys preying on very young girls. Brianna, an experimental-group mother in Los Angeles, talked about how hard it would be to raise her daughter if she had stayed in the projects. When asked what her rules for her daughter would be if she still lived in the projects, she brought up her fears about men preferring young adolescent girls.

> They go for the 12-year-olds, the 11-year-olds, and give them drugs and that's not good . . . I have seen a lot of young girls like that . . . I refuse for my daughter to be like that.

When the interviewer asked Brianna if she thought there were those same kinds of pressures on girls in her new, lower-poverty neighborhood, she said that it was different.

> I pay attention and it's different. The girls, they're different around here. I always say that. It's different. It really is. You know, if I would compare them to out here, out here they better. . . . You don't see them walking and hanging out and drinking and something that a teenager don't supposed to do with a grown man.

Comments of other mothers—particularly those living in high-poverty communities— reflected the same concerns about the pressure for very young girls to engage in sex with older boys and men. In contrast to the experimental-group movers, who generally spoke of having rescued their daughters or having escaped themselves from the dangers of distressed public housing, nearly all the girls—and mothers raising girls—living in high-poverty neighborhoods talked about their fears. Patricia, an experimental mover from Los Angeles who had had to move back to a high-poverty neighborhood with her 12-year-old daughter, was especially concerned about the pressures for early sexual initiation:

> When she at home, I make her stay to herself, she have friends that come over from school, but I don't let her socialize with too many people, because the girls, they fast, they got boyfriends, they having sex, and I don't want my daughter having sex. She only 12 years old, you know! And some girls get jealous because, you know, I don't know, it's just crazy.

Costs for Girls Who Live in High Poverty

These widespread concerns about harassment and early sexual activity reflect the reality that girls often pay a steep price for living in high-poverty environments—a price that can clearly affect their mental health and their life chances. The potential risks include pregnancy, contracting sexually transmitted disease, and experiencing domestic abuse, sexual coercion, and sexual violence. Sexual violence and coerced sex are common experiences for girls living in high-poverty neighborhoods; even if they themselves are not victims, they usually know others who are. Nearly all the girls—and mothers raising girls—who were still living in high-poverty neighborhoods talked about how badly men in their community treated women. Charmaine, an experimental-group mover in Los Angeles whose family had moved back to a high-poverty neighborhood, said that guys in her neighborhood treated women "terrible":

> They come at them wrong ways. They'll talk about their bootie or they'll just come to them straight, "Do you want to have sex?," or they talking about they use a girl. Yeah, they'll use a girl and they said—they call it "pimp a girl out." . . . Just get between her legs and just go on like nothing.

Some of these girls experience serious consequences as a result of the pervasive sexual pressures and violence. Carla and her teenage children moved back to public housing in New York after living for many years

in a lower-poverty neighborhood. Carla described the many bad things that had happened to her daughter since moving back: getting involved in risky sexual activity, catching herpes, being exposed to violence. Because of all these problems, Carla urgently wanted to move again to a safer neighborhood.

A small number of older girls described being in abusive relationships or being coerced by their boyfriends to have unprotected sex. Juliana is an experimental-group girl from Los Angeles whose family ended up moving back to a higher-poverty neighborhood. She got involved with an older man, became pregnant, and dropped out of school to care for her child. She and her mother both talked about how her boyfriend had physically abused her and how they had to force him to move out of their apartment. Juliana now feels she was taken advantage of and has suffered real harm as a result:

> I just think that at some point . . . girls stop trying to look for loving, whatever in an older guy, but then older guys take advantages, too . . . they can offer you more, but they can also do more harm . . . to me it would have been nicer to experience someone my own age . . . someone that he experienced something his first time and I did it too. I don't know. Something's different, because my experience wasn't very nice. And I regret it.

Even worse, a few girls spoke of being raped or molested by older men—in one case, her mother's boyfriend—and the consequences of that experience on their lives, including chronic fear and an inability to form positive relationships with men.

Impact on Mental Health and Well-Being

The anxiety that many mothers and daughters feel about the risks—and the potential consequences—of living in an environment that promotes harassment, early sexual initiation, coerced sex, and pregnancy pervades their comments. Those who have suffered domestic abuse or sexual violence are especially traumatized. Those who have managed to move to lower-poverty neighborhoods are aware of having escaped from an especially dangerous environment; those who are still living in high poverty are aware of the extreme risks and the constant need to be alert, aware, and protective. And, clearly, the reduced anxiety about harassment, pressure for early sexual activity, and sexual violence is one of the biggest benefits of making an MTO move to a lower-poverty community.

Adolescent girls respond to the threat of harassment and violence in various ways. Some try to show they are tough by the way they walk, talk, or dress. Others avoid risky places where they know they might face danger, including staying to themselves and staying inside the house. Mothers adopt a range of strategies to protect their daughters from sexual pressures, from allowing their daughters to have boyfriends "so they won't do it behind my back" to closely monitoring their daughters' friends and activities.

Antoinette is a young adult from an experimental-mover family who moved back to a high-poverty neighborhood in New York. She talked about her fear and how she carries herself to not attract attention:

> I got a way. When I walk down the street I look real evil. . . . I don't even smile like nothing, nothing. And if you did say something to me, it's like. . . . Why you talking to me? . . . something like that. . . . I don't respond to people. I have never responded to anyone. I think one time I responded to somebody and that's because the guy touched me . . . because . . . somebody could be crazy. You could be crazy, I could be crazy. . . . You know, that's disrespectful. . . . I, I don't think you should touch people to say hi. If you say hi, and I don't say nothing back, that mean I don't want to be bothered. But don't touch me, because it makes me nervous and you don't know what's going to happen after that.

Safety: The Potential for Long-Term Benefits

The evidence from the Three-City Study of MTO shows that moving from high- to lower-poverty areas yields real benefits for adolescent girls and their mothers, and MTO participants cite safety as their biggest gain overall. The results from the Three-City Study show that safety has meaning for adolescent girls beyond the lower exposure to gang violence and drug trafficking documented in the interim evaluation. As their own comments and those of their mothers indicate, girls who moved from high- to lower-poverty neighborhoods have also benefited from a dramatic change in their level of "female fear."

These findings clearly point to the need for more neighborhood-level research that will focus on the specific risks more likely to affect girls than boys—early sexual activity, teen pregnancy, victimization, and coerced sex. Researchers examining neighborhood effects on adolescents have tended to focus more, although not exclusively, on the problems more likely to affect young men: substance abuse, delinquency, and crime (Edelman, Holzer, and Offner 2006). It is important to understand the mechanisms that lead to poor outcomes for boys, but there should also be the same level of focus on the mechanisms that affect girls. Indeed, focusing on the mechanisms that have more impact on girls may illuminate understanding of the complex processes that lead to such poor outcomes for *both* male and female children in high-poverty neighborhoods.

Researchers also need to understand more about the role of parenting and how parents may buffer—or not buffer—their daughters from the pressures around them. Clearly, some mothers we interviewed monitor their daughters very carefully to try to prevent them from getting involved in early sexual activity. And it also seems clear that parents believe it is easier to monitor and protect their daughters when they live in lower-poverty communities where harassment and sexual pressure are not as pervasive. But some mothers manage to shelter their

daughters even in dangerous neighborhoods, while others fail, perhaps because of their own mental health or substance abuse problems. Researchers need to learn how successful parents manage in high-poverty contexts and what neighborhood mechanisms might support them.

In addition to suggesting new directions for research, these findings have important implications for policy.

Mobility may have long-term benefits for families. These findings clearly show that mobility programs are an effective strategy for improving the quality of life for low-income families. The improvement in safety seems to directly affect the mental health and overall well-being of teenage girls. We do not know what the long-term benefits of these improvements in adolescent girls' mental health and quality of life may be, but it seems plausible that they might include delayed child-bearing, better parenting, and more success in education and employment.

Mobility programs must do more than help participants move. These findings also highlight the importance of creating mobility programs that do more than simply help participants make an initial move to lower poverty. Given the evidence of such important benefits for adolescent girls, helping families *stay* in better neighborhoods is as important as helping them get there in the first place. Any new mobility efforts must include long-term supports to help families stay in the types of neighborhoods with environments that enable children and adolescents to thrive. These include long-term follow-up support, assistance in negotiating the private market and in dealing with landlords, and support in making connections to institutions in the new community.

Address the problems in inner-city communities that put youth at risk. Finally, these results point to the urgent need to address the problems in distressed, inner-city neighborhoods that create the kinds of communities that put young girls—and boys—at such great risk. Mobility is one option but is unlikely to be implemented on a large enough scale to help most of the children growing up in these neighborhoods. Certainly, interventions that offer girls both safe havens—after-school programs and the like—and support in resisting the pressures for early sexual initiation are important in the short run. But researchers also need to understand more about what underlies the social breakdown that is allowing older boys and men to view young girls as sexually available and design interventions that can help interrupt this dangerous trend. Focusing on ways to engage these young men in education and the labor market is clearly part of the solution, but we must also develop strategies to change the attitudes toward girls and women that underlie the destructive behavior. Finding solutions will be neither easy nor inexpensive, but solutions are essential if we hope to help the young people growing up in these distressed communities have a real chance for a better life.

Notes

1. All respondent names are pseudonyms.
2. Another research team conducted qualitative research in Chicago and Baltimore. See, for example, Clampet-Lundquist and colleagues (2006).
3. A count of the data reveals that 18 female adolescent and young adults in the experimental complier group said they experienced no harassment, compared with 3 who said they did. In contrast, 18 experimental noncompliers and 10 controls described harassment, fear, and the like, compared with 9 controls who did not report these experiences.

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TABLE 1. Summary of Studies from the Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing Demonstration (MTO) Used to Examine Neighborhood Effects on Adolescents' Health and Behavior

Study	Method	Years after move	Sample	Findings	Reference(s)
MTO-Baltimore	Administrative data on juvenile arrest records	2.5 years	336 mostly black and Latino 11–16-year-olds at randomization	■ E boys less likely to be arrested for violent crime than C boys	Ludwig, Duncan, and Hirschfield (2001)
MTO-Boston	Interviews with parents	2.2 years	612 mostly black and Latino 6–15-year-olds	■ E boys fewer behavior problems than C boys	Katz, Kling, and Liebman (2001)
MTO-New York City	Interviews with children	2.5 years	512 black and Latino 8–18-year-olds	■ E boys fewer anxious or depressive problems than C boys ■ E boys fewer dependency problems than C boys	Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2003)
MTO Interim	Interviews with children and parents and administrative criminal justice data	5 years	5,074 mostly black and Latino 6–20-year-olds at interview	*Girls age 12–19:* ■ E less psychological distress past year than C ■ E lower odds of lifetime general anxiety disorder than C *Girls age 15–19/25:* ■ E less likely to ever use marijuana than C ■ E less likely to ever smoke than C ■ E less likely to be arrested for violent crime than C ■ E less likely to be arrested for property crime than C *Boys age 12–19:* ■ E more behavior problems than C *Boys age 15–19/25:* ■ E more likely to ever smoke than C ■ E more likely to be arrested for property crime than C	Orr et al. (2003); Kling, Ludwig, and Katz (2005)

E = experimental group; C = control group

The Moving to Opportunity Demonstration

In 1994, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) launched the Moving to Opportunity Demonstration (MTO) in 1994 in five metropolitan areas: Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. MTO was a voluntary relocation program for very low income residents of public and assisted housing located in high-poverty neighborhoods in these cities. Those who volunteered were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups: a control group (families retained their public housing unit, but received no new assistance); a Section 8 comparison group (families received the standard counseling and a voucher subsidy for use in the private housing market); or an experimental group. The experimental group families received special relocation counseling (focused on opportunities to live in low-poverty areas) and search assistance. They also received a voucher usable only in a low-poverty neighborhood (less than 10 percent poor as of the 1990 Census), with the requirement that the family live there for at least one year.

Of the 1,820 families assigned to the experimental group, just under half (48 percent, or 860) found a willing landlord with a suitable rental unit and moved successfully or "leased up"; they were experimental "complier" families. The MTO Interim Impacts Evaluation—conducted in 2002, approximately five to seven years after families relocated—found that many experimental group families had moved again, some of them several times—and many moved out of their low-poverty neighborhoods. In addition, about 70 percent of the control group had moved out of public housing, mostly to other poor urban neighborhoods. Families in the MTO experimental group, however, were still much more likely to be living in low-poverty areas (whether the original placement areas or other areas) than their Section 8 voucher or control family counterparts. MTO families also had lived for longer periods in such areas than families in the other two groups.

The Three-City Study of MTO

The Three-City Study of MTO is a large-scale, mixed-method study focused on three MTO sites: Boston, Los Angeles, and New York. The study was designed to examine key puzzles that emerged in previous MTO research, including the Interim Evaluation, and combines analysis of MTO survey, census, and neighborhood indicator data with new, qualitative data collection. The family-level data were collected in 2004 and 2005—about 6 to 10 years after families' initial placement through the MTO program and 2 years after the Interim Evaluation data collection. First, we randomly selected 122 families, conducting 276 semistructured, in-depth qualitative interviews with parents, adolescents, and young adults in all three treatment groups. We included compliers (those who successfully moved at the outset) and noncompliers (those who did not move through the program) in the experimental and comparison groups, although we weighted compliers more heavily. Overall, we conducted 81 interviews in Boston, 120 in Los Angeles, and 75 in New York. The combined cooperation rate (consents as a share of eligible households contacted) was 80 percent. Next, we launched "family-focused" ethnographic fieldwork, visiting a subset of 39 control group and experimental-complier families repeatedly over six to eight months. The cooperation rate for the ethnographic subsample was 70 percent.

The Three-City Study of MTO is housed at the Urban Institute. The principal investigators are Xavier de Souza Briggs of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Susan Popkin of the Urban Institute, and John Goering of the City University of New York. The study is funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Annie E. Casey, Fannie Mae, Rockefeller, Smith-Richardson, and William T. Grant Foundations.

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